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MR RAGAN · THAD STEM, JR.  
THE · BEGINNING  
WINNER OF THE NORTH CAROLINA TRICENTENARY POETRY AWARD



To Kon -

With Highest Regards and  
Best Wishes,

Sam Ragon  
Nov. 12, 1984



IN · THE · BEGINNING



SAM RAGAN · THAD STEM, JR.  
IN · THE · BEGINNING

WINNER OF THE NORTH CAROLINA TERCENTENARY POETRY AWARD

Tryon, North Carolina  
USA

*Gallopade  
Publishing  
Group*

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Wee viewed the land about us, being  
whereas we first landed, very sandie,  
and lowe towards the water side, but  
so full of grapes, as the very beating  
and surge of the sea overflowed them,  
of which we founde such plentie, as well  
there, as in all places else, both on  
the sande, and on the greene soile on  
the hills, as in the plaines, as well on  
every little shrubbe, as also climbing  
towards the toppes of the high Cedars, that  
I think in all the world the like  
abundance is not to be founde . . .

-Barlowe in *The Roanoke Voyages*  
(*The Hakluyt Society*)



*In the Beginning*

They came up the river with the tide,  
Poling the flatboat past a sawgrass sea

It was a movement of time,  
Fruit of that first surging,  
Finding voice in a lonely land's cry.

Where vines dipped to the water on the far bank,  
The Woman rode the horse, silent against the sun.  
He called her name, loudly, above the cry of birds,  
And the current, steady as time underfoot,  
Pulled him to land, to the clearing, and to her.

She had already tied the spent and heaving horse,  
 Yet with a gesture of exhausted ownership,  
 That somehow managed to animate depletion,  
 She spread her empty hand about the small place  
 As if explaining an old fantasy suddenly becoming  
 reality.

They let the low-flying sunset crows  
Stake off the circle of a camp for that first night.  
Then, beyond the shadows of the campfire  
Crickets rattled a furtive requiem,  
A requiem pierced by cries from afar.

He poked the fire brighter  
To keep at bay the unknown, waiting  
In the darkness, in the wilderness,  
In the strange, new world of hope and fear.



As night was fully come, she moved closer,  
Becoming as a tailsman, as a wild plum,  
For fear, or as an ancient, urgent habit  
Against an alien land and vast sunrises beyond the  
horizons.

They arose at first dawn and moved on —  
Two miles, four miles a day,  
A few raw blisters in actual distance, and yet  
Uncharted continents every hour. Until, finally,  
They reached the end of land and of dreaming  
And set down their buckets by the deep springs,  
There on the bluff where the trees, tall and sweet  
smelling,  
Took the burden of their ravaged path for a souvenir,  
A fig for time and toil.

There was no name for it, nor any time for  
naming,  
Nor even awareness of an epic set in motion. But  
It was April and the dogwood was the silence  
Of wisdom laid bare, a benediction, a respite,  
. . . . and they whispered, home . . . home . . . .

With a sharp ax for legal papers, the Man  
Moved in upon the wilderness to clear a special  
place  
For shelter, for home and a hiding, and the  
Woman  
Busied her hands with fires and with skillets,  
With sweepings, bakings, and mendings,  
And they were home.

## II

Once, in the time of the long blue day,  
When he plowed the green corn, the blades  
Wet upon his knees, the Indian he had been told to  
fear  
Stood in feathered silence in the tiny border where  
labor left off  
And the wilderness began again.

The team was halted to turn the row,  
And thus they stood fastened silently  
In all their thrice-told fears, bereft  
Of common language of words or joys or pains,  
Who was giving offense to whom and how.

And then the Indian was gone,  
Melted silently into the grass and the stones  
Beyond the river, leaving and carrying a trail  
Of insoluble question marks to humor the wind.

And there was only the brutal cry of the hawk,  
The spice of the wild orchard and the salt-water  
marsh  
To join or separate the two.



Hurriedly, with fast heart and sweating hands,  
He ran his furrow homeward. But she,  
Chopping and humming among the bean rows,  
Saw nothing, heard nothing, until he gathered her in,

Pushing roughly against the cabin door,  
Bolting and locking it. And then  
The long vigil, the pitiless silence,  
The oppressive weight of suns and stars,  
The endless watching, the terrible waiting  
For something, for someone that never returned.

### *III*

*. . . .The corn grew tall  
And the harvest was good.*

*The plowed earth pushed  
Against the wilderness.  
The orchard was a cloud  
Of white fire in springtime.*

*The bins were stored for winter  
With summer's steaming opulence.  
The children came. Two were buried  
In that crude burying ground  
Time lost so long ago.*

*The cabin became a house  
If it always remained a cabin.  
But there was a porch, broad  
And built for rocking, and  
Finally windows with glass eyes  
Looked far into the retreating timber. . .*

He was one of them,  
They were two of them.  
There were others,  
Loose pennies spilling  
Up and down creeks,  
Fording rivers at the shallows,  
Coming up the valleys, walking  
The ridges, then faster  
As a handful of coins  
Pouring from a pocket hole,  
Finding a place, turning soil,  
Building, living, working, dying.

He was one of them.  
They were two of them.  
There were others, always  
Others until the forests  
Were pushed out of sight.



#### IV

No one really ever had a name for it,  
Because it was more than place or name  
Or time or fact or act or public record.  
It was an almanac kept by the wind,  
Written upon by suns and storms,  
Drawn upon by briars and stones,  
Washed down by snows and stars.

It was something that trembled  
Upon the noonday air, something  
That melted into blue noon illusion.

The wind had no name for it.  
The wind could only moan, or  
Whistle through its teeth  
And come up with nothing better  
Than a handful of rose petals,  
A thistle, and a holly berry.

But their names, even then conjured up  
The hedgerows and stone walls  
Of Cornwall, Oxford, Hanover.

For England was still a portion of their blood, but  
A chemistry of many changes had worked its magic  
Toil begat a solid pride, built fires  
All the waters of politics could not extinguish.

The loud voice at the settlement store  
Rose above the murmur of caution . . . .  
— "I wear no man's collar" —  
The Man heard them and they crowded the mind,  
Were mulled upon as the soil flowed  
From the plow's mould  
In the breaking of new grounds.

The words were molded to find voice later  
In the wham-wham of guns  
At Cowpens, Kings Mountain, Guilford,  
And along the banks of the Haw.  
But all that came in the travail of time,  
Out of the winters of moonless evenings,  
And the sweet taste of spring  
When the birds sang —  
    "be free, be free."

*It was a shape seeking a voice,  
And finding a voice . . . .  
a new people  
a new land  
a new name.*



On all the maps the names stand out:  
Albemarle, the land about,  
The Neuse, the Tar, the Pamlico,  
The hunting horns of Tallyho,  
Brunswick, Bladen, and Barco,  
Orange, Edgecomb, and Onslow.

. . . . and some are known only to the wind  
hidden in the honeysuckle of memory  
Hidden in the honeysuckle of memory  
and bared only to the prowl of winds. ■

**Sam Ragan** is Poet Laureate of North Carolina. A native of Granville County, he is author of three prize-winning collections of poetry — *THE TREE IN THE FAR PASTURE*, *TO THE WATER'S EDGE* and *JOURNEY INTO MORNING*.

He was the first Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. A former chairman of the North Carolina Arts Council, he was on the founding commission and is a former trustee of the North Carolina School of the Arts.

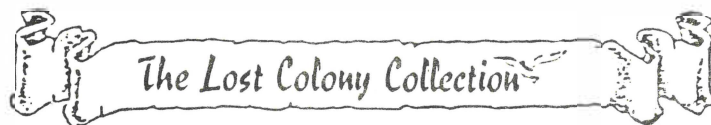
A nationally known journalist, he is a former executive editor of THE NEWS and OBSERVER in Raleigh and is currently editor and publisher of THE PILOT in Southern Pines, where he lives with his wife Marjorie.

The late **Thad Stem, Jr.**, poet and essayist, was born in Oxford, North Carolina in 1916. He attended Duke University. As a poet, he became recognized as North Carolina's bard of the village and countryside.

He frequently contributed feature stories to the state newspapers on history. His unsigned, but easily recognized, editorials in the RALEIGH NEWS and OBSERVER have been widely copied. In 1961 he was appointed chairman of the State Library Board.

His books include *Entries From Oxford*, *Thad Stem's First Reader* and *Ransacking Words and Customs*. His juvenile book, *The Jackknife Horse*, was winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Award.





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Those Whose Names Were Terrible

In the Beginning/Sam Ragan & Thad Stem

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